

September 2016 Safety Article: Love, American Biker Style - Part One

Home for me is in the Missouri Ozarks. In the heat of the summer, the folks would load us up in the 1950s model Willy's Jeep and we would wind our way down to Cedar Grove on Current River for a day of playing in the river, skipping rocks, and people watching. There really aren't a lot of people in the northwest corner of Shannon County, Missouri, but the locals know where the bends in the river are that will cause people to tip their canoes. We had more fun by people watching along the banks of the Current River than any Las Vegas or Off-Broadway show I have ever seen. You could always tell the couples that were seasoned at handling their canoe, and the river, as they managed it as a team. Each person knew what they were supposed to do as part of that team and they would glide through the bend with ease. It was also easy to pick out the newer ones, the ones who hadn't learned their lessons yet, as they were the ones chasing their coolers down the river and yelling curse words at each other because the canoe flipped.

Love is grand. Divorce is ten grand. Your big touring bike.... twenty grand. You both said "For better or for worse", so how do you keep your motorcycle habits from costing you another ten grand in divorce? At first she liked the idea of riding with you into the sunset and with a gentle squeeze around the waist you got that non-verbal sense of her saying "Honey, thank you for doing this with me." Now, as you roll on miles together, you sometimes find her hands holding a death grip around your throat, as if to say, "Honey, will you please stop doing this to me!" What happened to create this? It all used to be so simple for you both, but now it seems like every time there is a ride, there is a fight. In fact, I've probably seen more spousal fights as a result of motorcycling than resulting from tipped canoes. Why is that?

When learning to ride, the operator of the bike takes a basic motorcycle riding course (or they SHOULD take one). They may find more opportunities to develop their skills and improve their riding experience. What about the passengers? How does one learn to ride behind a motorcycle rider and help keep them both safe? Sure, there is always the back-seat rider's deep gasp of air or scream that pierces right into your ear, but that isn't really helping to keep you both safe.

In his book "Proficient Motorcycling", David L. Hough tells his perspective: "...the scariest rides of my life were those rare occasions when I had to thumb a ride on the back of someone else's bike. *Hey! There aren't any handlebars back here! What am I supposed to hang on to? Where's the brake lever? I can't see where the bike is headed! I don't know which way we're going to lean! Uh oh, I think I'm slipping off the back! Slow down!*" If you have ever ridden as a passenger on a motorcycle, chances are you've had these thoughts before.

Any marriage counselor will tell you that communication is important. When you board an airplane, you assume the pilot knows what to do, yet the flight crew will spend a few moments at the beginning of each flight going over what to do in case of an emergency. When you board a cruise ship, the same thing will happen by having to pass a muster drill with instructions on boarding the life boats. So, as the operator of a motorcycle, you need to make sure that you and your crew are kept safe as well. Discuss riding gear and check each other's riding gear, making sure helmets fit and are secured properly. For novice passengers, help your passenger understand the value of warm, durable jackets that don't flap in the wind. Sturdy boots will help protect against burns on hot exhaust pipes as well as other injuries. Gloves will help protect the

hands. Goggles or a face shield will help protect the eyes. Wearing spiked heels could melt against the mufflers and twisted ankles when stepping off the bike on an unstable surface.

Also, explaining that the bike always needs to be balanced by the operator when mounting and dismounting the bike. Verbally confirm with each other that the operator is ready for the passenger to move, for if the operator is not, the bike can very easily fall over.

Having a passenger not only changes the bike's total weight, but relocates the center of mass. This is a change that can significantly impact your bike's control. Acceleration, braking and cornering tactics all change, not just because of the additional mass, but where it is loaded on the bike. Even when the passenger is perfectly still, the rider's weight can cause your bike to shift a way you are not used to and create problems.

Braking distances are also elongated, but with aggressive braking comes another issue. The sudden stopping will cause the body, helmet, and face to slam up against the operator, causing potential loss of control. Making easier, more controlled stops will make things easier on everyone, but sudden braking sometimes has to happen. Practice making quick stops by yourself and then with your passenger on the back to help you both be prepared.

When it comes to acceleration, just exactly how substantial are those silly little grab straps that run sideways across the seat? A solid backrest is the best way to help protect your passenger. Trust me, she will thank you for a good one that she can lean back against. If you don't have one and your passenger has to hold on to you, pay attention to how much the passenger is pulling on you when you accelerate. If it feels like you are getting pulled back, it is a good indicator that you may need to not roll on as much throttle.

Cornering and taking hills (up or down) with your passenger, as well as riding with children all have significant considerations upon the operation of your motorcycle. We'll visit those in the next article. In the meantime, think on this:

When you started dating, you learned to talk with each other. Most people didn't meet their mate the first time in the back seat at the drive-in movie. It took time to build on that foundation that has turned into something fun and meaningful for the both of you. Visit those types of behaviors regarding your motorcycling as well. Talk with each other about mounting and dismounting the bike. Listen to what she is saying to you when you are going too fast. Avoid the sudden changes in forward motion by trying slamming the brakes on something good.

Learning to enjoy your motorcycle together can be a great experience, so be smart about what you are doing on your bike and get home to enjoy your riding partner so you both can live to ride another day!

...and "Hey! Let's be CAREFUL out there!

By Matt Thomason